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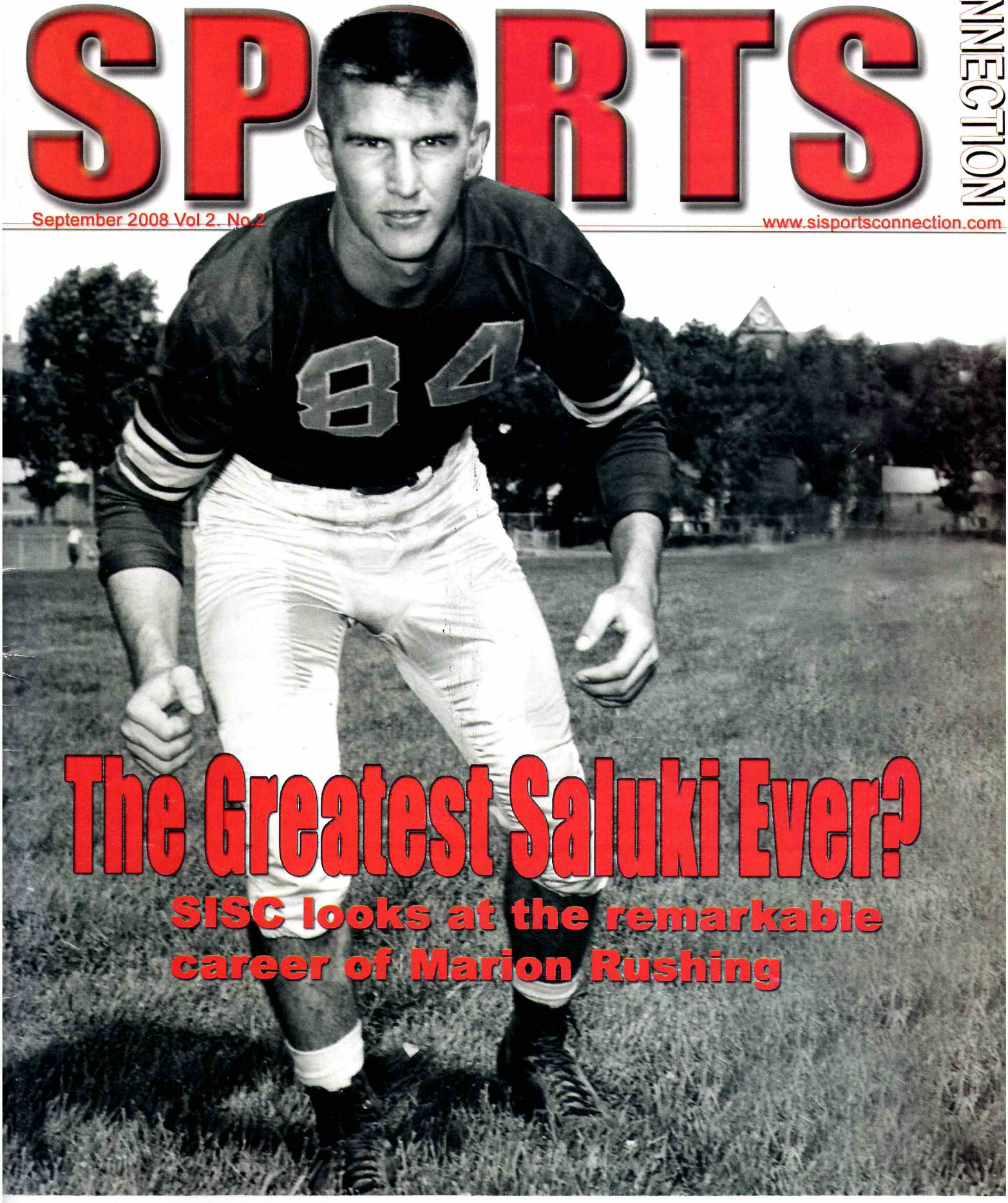
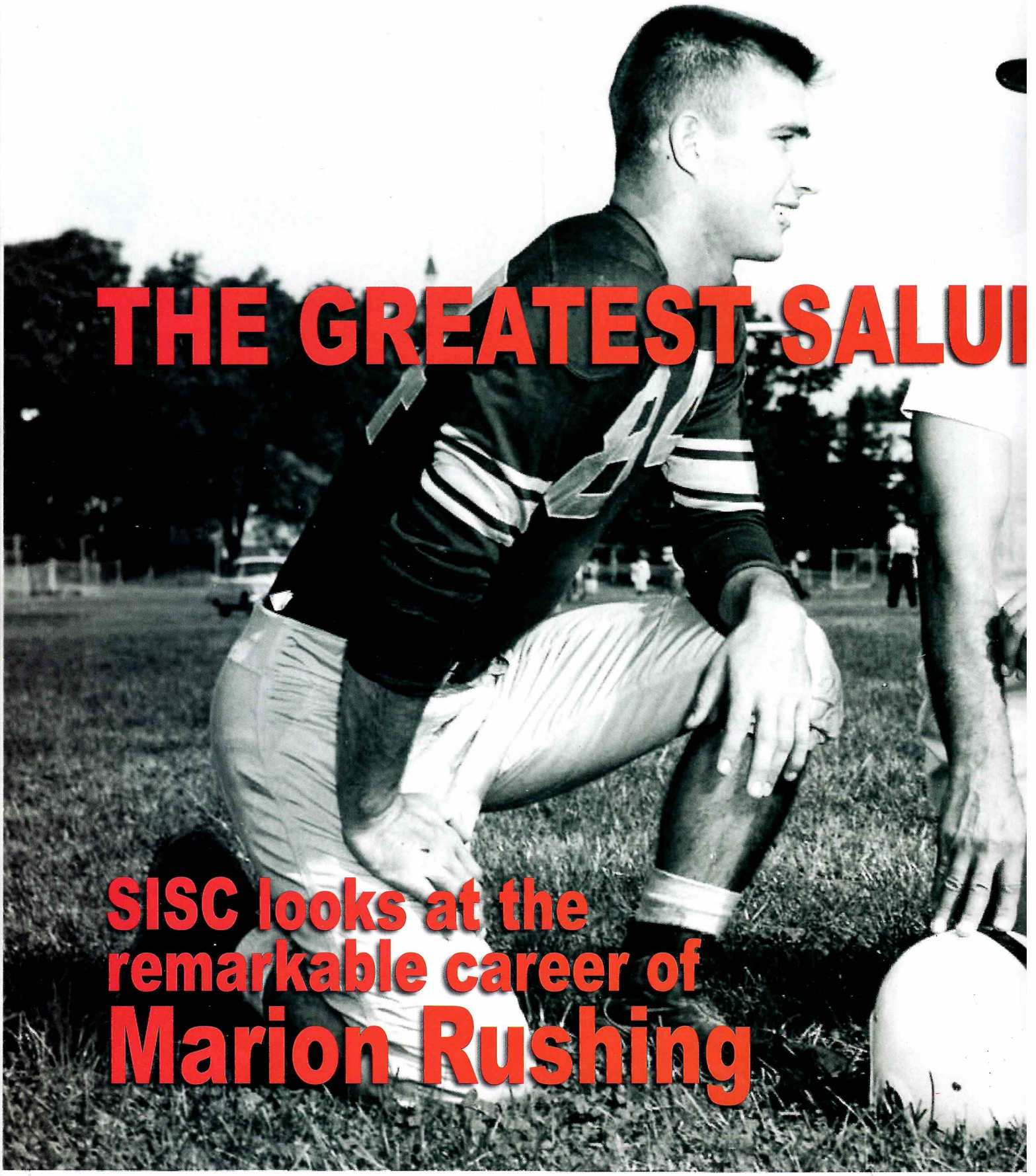


The Greatest Saluki Ever?

SISC looks at the remarkable career of Marion Rushing



THE GREATEST SALUT

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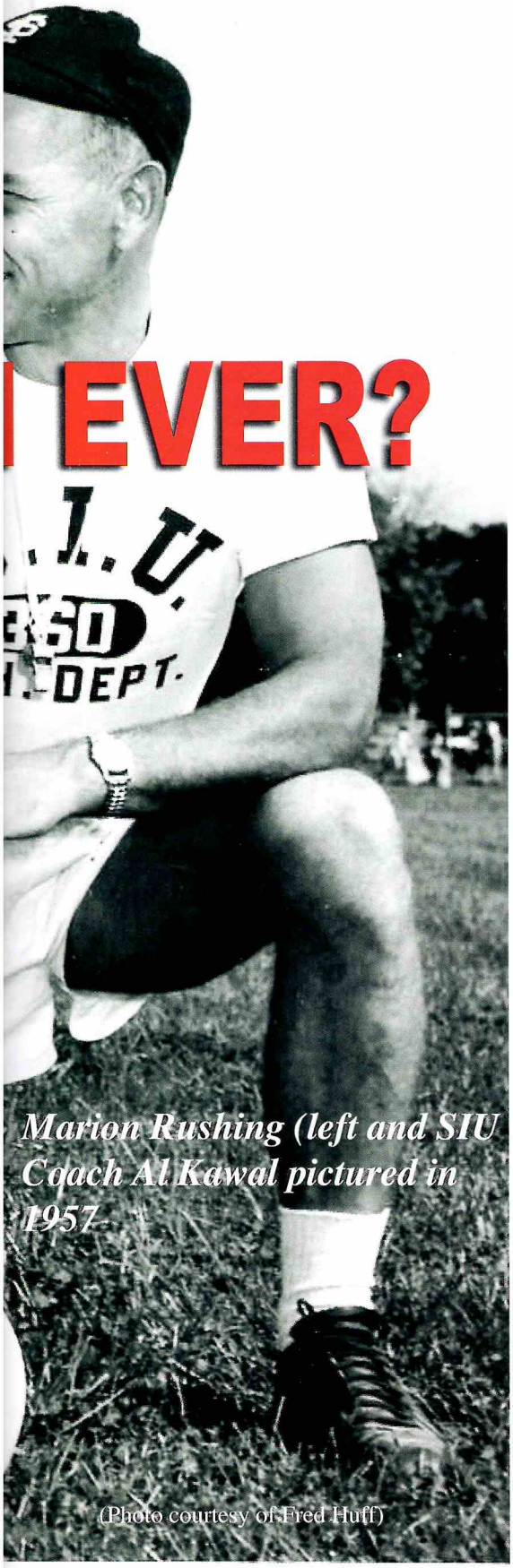


Marion Rushing (left and SIU Coach Al Kawal pictured in 1957

(Photo courtesy of Fred Huff)

Joe Yusko and Gordon Lambert grew up playing sports in the late 1940s in Southern Illinois – a time when coal mine tipples dotted the landscape and the baby-boom era was just beginning.

Yusko, who played at West Frankfort, and Lambert, who played at Marion, wouldn't meet until they attended Southern Illinois University in the mid-1950s but both athletes learned a valuable lesson while honing their athletic talents in their respective community.

"Once a teammate always a teammate," Yusko said.

"And you always pick a teammate up when he's down," Lambert added.

It was that reasoning that prompted Yusko and Lambert to contact SISC with a story idea about Marion Rushing – who in their assessment is 'the greatest Southern Illinois athlete ever.'

Certainly, anytime the 'greatest anything' is mentioned, especially athletes, there's differing opinions.

Who's the greatest Southern Illinois athlete of all time?

Pose that question to 10 people and there's a good chance you'll get 10 different answers. Certainly the era involved, size of the school and the overall success of the team the individual played on have to be factored in making a choice.

But, regardless of all those intangibles individual personal accomplishments have to weigh heavily when trying to determine the greatest athlete to ever lace up a pair of sneakers.

For decades, perhaps more than a century, there has been a single standard used in athletics – from grade school children through college stars who have an eye on professional sports – that has determined success for all athletes. That standard is a 'letter,' the letter representing a respective school ('C' for Carterville, 'P' for Pinckneyville), the letter that signifies being a significant member of a team.

Letters are unique because they're not won, they're not awarded, but instead they're earned. And if the greatest athletes are being considered and the letters earned are the measuring stick then Marion Rushing, with 13 letters earned during his four years at SIU, really is in a class all by himself.

During a meeting at a local restaurant Yusko and Lambert – who were both outstanding high school and college athletes in their own right – laid out a solid argument to back up their claim about Rushing's athletic prowess. But it wasn't so much the argument presented, after all 13 letters speak volumes, as it was the reasoning behind the decision by Yusko and Lambert to volunteer to tell their former teammates' story.

Rushing has battled Parkinson 's disease for more than 20 years – a debilitating illness that has robbed him of his ability to walk or talk.

"Rush (Rushing) was so unassuming and humble that he probably wouldn't have talked about his success if he could," said Yusko. "But, he was a great teammate and we wanted to tell his story for him."

And a great story it is.

--Jim Muir--

By Jim Muir

When discussing all-time great athletes in Illinois the name of Thomas Dwight "Dike" Eddleman is often mentioned.

Eddleman grew up and starred at Centralia High School and later at the University of Illinois where he was a three-sport standout. He earned 11 letters in football, basketball and track during his collegiate days with Illinois. Eddleman has had books written about him, a street named after him and is still revered in the Champaign-Urbana area.

Joe Yusko believes that everything Eddleman is to Fighting Illini fans Marion Rushing is and should be to Saluki fans.

"He was that good and in the same category with Dike Eddleman," said Yusko when talking about Rushing's career at SIU. "In fact, Eddleman earned 11 letters at Illinois and Rushing earned 13 at SIU."

Rushing earned letters in football in 1954, 1955, 1956 and 1957 and in basketball in 1955, 1956 and 1957. He also lettered in track in 1955, 1956, 1957 and 1958 and in wrestling in 1958 and 1959. Following college Rushing made his professional debut in the NFL in 1959 with the Chicago Cardinals. He played in the NFL for 7 years, playing for the St. Louis Cardinals, Atlanta Falcons and Chicago Cardinals over the course of seven year NFL career. Rushing also played in the AFL for one year, playing for the Houston Oilers the entire time.

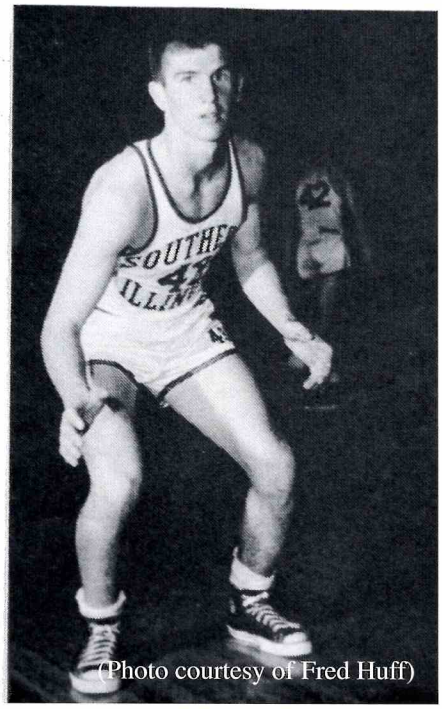
Yusko graduated from West Frankfort High School in 1952 and went to the University of Illinois on a football scholarship. He was injured during his first year and returned home, later transferring to SIU where he played football for four years. It was at SIU in 1954 that Yusko and Rushing became teammates.

"He was off the charts athletically," said Yusko. "He could do anything … when you think about the fact that he was good enough to play professional football, he started several basketball games in college and he set records in track and as a wrestler, it was an incredible career." Yusko used the word 'humble' repeatedly when talking about Rushing's demeanor.

"He was a quiet guy, didn't say that much," said Yusko. "If you met him without knowing just how great of an athlete he was you'd have never known. He wasn't the kind of guy that would toot his own horn. He was just very unassuming and humble. He was just a farm boy from Perry County who happened to be a great athlete."

Lambert, a retired Marion attorney, played basketball and baseball at SIU and was also a teammate of Rushing. Lambert echoed Yusko's sentiments about Rushing's quiet demeanor but added that the Pinckneyville native had a toughness about him that he had never seen in any other athlete.

Marion Rushing



(Photo courtesy of Fred Huff)

"I remember during football season one year 'Rush' got his hand stepped on and it swelled up, I mean, twice its normal size, it was obviously broken," said Lambert. "He would carry it kind of under his other arm so nobody could see how bad it was. We kept on telling him that he needed to go see the trainer. He said emphatically, 'I'm not going to do it, because if I do they'll tell me it's broken and they won't let me play, and I'm going to play.' He never did go to the trainer but he played the next game."

Lambert said while other athletes would head to downtown Carbondale for the nightlife and perhaps a few beers, Rushing never was part of the group.

"He was just very dedicated," said Lambert. "He was very religious, a good Baptist, just a very kind farm kid, but boy, what an athlete. While his athletic ability stands out he was as good a person as he was an athlete."

When mentioning Rushing's teammates, the one that has clearly been at his side longer than anybody is wife Bonnie. The couple has been married 44 years and have three children, Pam (Hall), of Herrin, Chad and Troy, who both live in Pinckneyville.

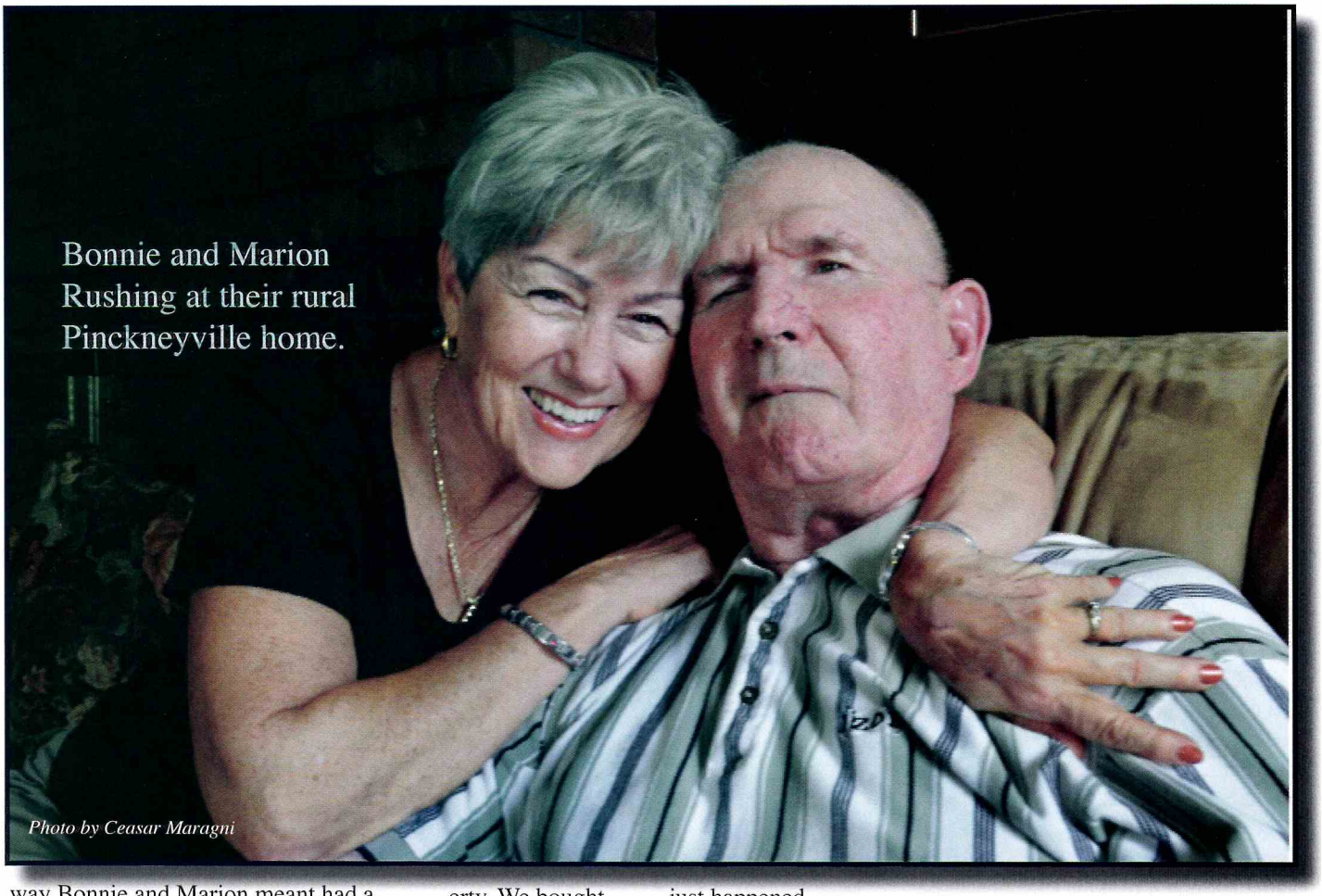
Bonnie now oversees her husband's daily care. She said he was first diagnosed with Parkinson's disease more than 25 years ago and said his health has declined steadily during the past few years. Rushing can walk with assistance but can barely speak above a whisper.

"He won't initiate any conversation, I think it's just too difficult for him," Bonnie said. "But, he understands when somebody talks to him."

When asked how she first met her future husband Bonnie related a remarkable story – a story that would give proof that some romances are destined. Bonnie (Dodillet) grew up in Centralia and when she was a senior in high school visited her sister, Sue, who was a sophomore at SIU. The sisters attended a Saturday afternoon Salukis game and Bonnie took note of a picture in the program of the team captain, a strapping young man named Marion Rushing.

"I took one look at his picture and I thought, 'oh man.' I thought he was the cutest guy I had ever seen," Bonnie recalled. "I cut the picture out of the program and I carried it in my wallet for three years before I ever met him."

Even the circumstances surrounding the



Bonnie and Marion Rushing at their rural Pinckneyville home.

Photo by Ceasar Maragni

way Bonnie and Marion meant had a meant-to-be air about it.

"I had a friend named Bill Bush and we were driving from Centralia to Carbondale and he told me he wanted to stop in Pinckneyville and talk to a buddy," Bonnie said. "I asked who his buddy was and he said 'Marion Rushing.' Well, needless to say I didn't object to him stopping."

Bonnie said she and Marion soon began dating but she waited several months to tell him about the picture she had carried all those years.

"He didn't believe me until I pulled the shredded picture out of my wallet and showed him," she said.

Following his career in professional football Rushing began a career as a farmer and also worked for more than 20 years as a coal miner.

"He liked hard work and he loved heavy equipment," said Bonnie. "For leisure he loved to fish. I still get him on our four-wheeler and drive him around our property. We bought 360 acres in 1964, it's just strip pits and hills and there are nice trails. He really enjoys that."

Bonnie also used the word 'unassuming' when describing the way Marion looked at his athletic success.

"Certainly he was very competitive and he wanted to win badly but his ability was really no big deal to him, he just took it all in stride," she said. "He didn't care anything about applause or notoriety, he just did his very best and whatever happened, just happened. He always said there was more to life than sports. I always thought of him as a gentle giant."

Bonnie said Marion has accepted his illness with the same attitude he had when he was excelling at four different sports at SIU.

"It has been a very tough road, very tough," she said. "But, I have never heard him complain, not a single word. There's no 'poor, poor me' he just takes things as they come and does the best he can."

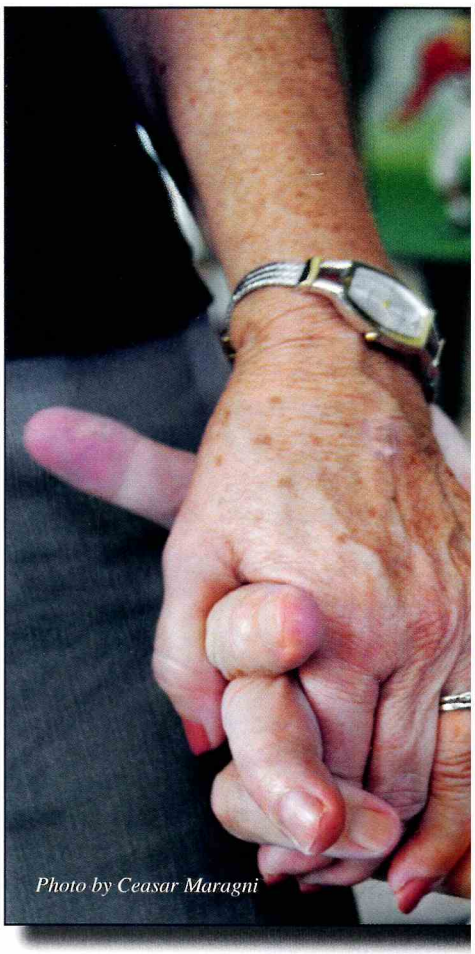


Photo by Ceasar Maragni

What is Parkinson's disease?

Parkinson's disease is a movement disorder that is chronic and progressive, meaning that symptoms continue and worsen over time. As many as one million Americans suffer from Parkinson's disease, which is more than the combined number of people diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy and Lou Gehrig's disease. Incidence of Parkinson's increases with age, but an estimated 4 percent of people with PD are diagnosed before the age of 50. The cause is unknown, and although there is presently no cure, there are many treatment options such as medication and surgery to manage the symptoms.

Parkinson's disease occurs when a group of cells in an area of the brain called the substantia nigra begin to malfunction and die. These cells in the substantia nigra produce a chemical called dopamine. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter, or chemical messenger, that sends information to the parts of the brain that control movement and coordination. When a person has Parkinson's disease, their dopamine-producing cells begin to die and the amount of dopamine produced in the brain decreases. Messages from the brain telling the body how and when to move are therefore delivered more slowly, leaving a person incapable of initiating and controlling movements in a normal way.

Parkinson's disease can also cause several different symptoms. The specific group of symptoms that an individual experiences varies from person to person. Some of the most common symptoms of Parkinson's disease are:

* tremor of the hands, arms, legs, jaw and face

* rigidity or stiffness of the limbs and trunk

* bradykinesia or slowness of movement

* postural instability or impaired balance and coordination

-- Source: Parkinson's Disease Foundation (www.pdf.org) --

Marion Rushing's athletic career at SIU was one of a kind. No one had ever accomplished what he did as a Saluki athlete in the mid-1950s and no one has come close since . . . nor will they.

Rushing is a native of Pinckneyville where as a prep athlete, he was a football standout, a solid basketball player on Merrill "Duster" Thomas' outstanding teams and a consistent winner in track as a high jumper and shot putter.

At SIU where he enrolled in the fall of 1954 and graduated in the spring of 1959, Rushing earned four letters in football, four in track, three in basketball and two in wrestling. The total of 13 varsity awards is the coveted accomplishment that he alone owns.

Another is that he was the first Saluki athlete to win SIU's "most outstanding athlete of the year" award twice. Since Rushing gained the honor in 1956 and 1958, gymnast Rusty Mitchell duplicated the feat in 1963 and 1964 and basketball/track standout Chuck Benson in 1968 and 1969.

Statistics in Rushing's era were not as refined as they became in later years and as a result there are no defensive records in football throughout his career. It is noted in Saluki history that he played at three different positions – end, center and guard – offensively while he was a defensive power as an end. And, yes, players performed on both offense and defense in those years.

As a senior in football in 1957, Rushing was team captain, received SIU's most valuable player award and was a first-team all-conference choice after having been named to the second team the two previous seasons.

He likewise earned four letters in track where he excelled throwing the javelin. In fact, he established a new SIU record in the event in his final season when he threw the spear 195 feet, 11 1/2 inches breaking a 26-year-old mark.

Football assistant coach Bob Franz filled in as SIU's wrestling coach in 1958 when Jim Wilkinson took a sabbatical leave of absence, talked Rushing into competing in the one-on-one sport rather than basketball and it proved to be a good decision for the one-time Panther prep star.

At 6-2, perhaps 6-3 depending on which SIU roster one prefers to accept, and 190 pounds, Rushing competed at the heavyweight class in wrestling and has the distinction of being a member of the only two undefeated (in duals) teams in school history. The Salukis earned the honor in both 1958 and 1959 with Marion claiming the conference heavyweight title in the latter year.

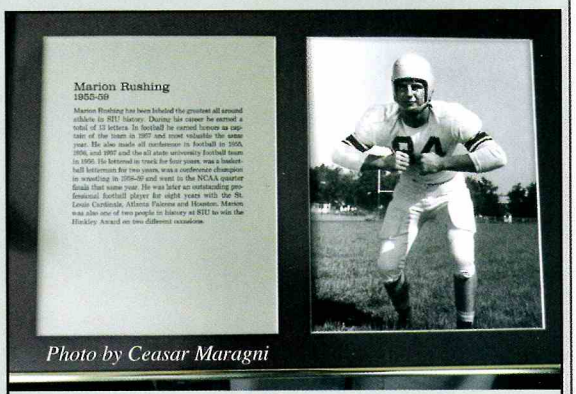


Photo by Ceasar Maragni

This plaque hangs in the SIU Hall of Fame in Carbondale honoring Marion for his accomplishments.

Perhaps the finest of all SIU honors Rushing owns, however, is that he was included on the charter class of the university's sports hall of fame when it was formed in 1978.

Just 10 athletes from the post-World War II era were so honored when Rushing was included with the likes of Walt Frazier, Jim Hart, Chico Vaughn and Larry Kistoff. And, Rushing's athletic career did not end when he left SIU's campus as he enjoyed almost a dozen years in the NFL.

Unquestionably Marion Rushing is one of the finest all-around athletes ever produced in Southern Illinois.

– Fred Huff –